



If Bugs Bunny and his cartoon companions seem less animated these days, blame it on high costs

By Ellen Torgerson

Most infants, toddlers, grade-schoolers and early adolescents love animated cartoons on Saturday morning. But assorted critics and parents are outraged by the quality of animation viewed by these nouveau minds. Why isn't the jolly hostility between Tom and Jerry as amusing as it was 30 years ago, these adults ask? Why is Bugs Bunny slowing down? Is the Road Runner arteriosclerotic?

The reason these charming cartoon animals seem to react less speedily than they used to is a fairly simple technical one. In the good old days, according to one animation studio,

drawings for animated cartoons flickered by at the rate of 12 per second. That was known as "full animation." Today—on Saturday-morning cartoons, anyway—there are only two drawings per second. That's "limited animation": one drawing must do the work of six.

Many Hollywood animators producing television cartoons for the kiddie trade agree that contemporary animation isn't the imaginative marvel it was at its height, when Walt Disney and all the studios were turning out six-minute shorts (and some full-length features) for movie theaters. It was a world in which kissable coyotes, ducks, jerboas, bluebirds, woodchucks, sloths, gnu and bears talked and acted just like human beings. And animated human beings stepped directly out of fairy tales, comic books and the myths that fed all our fantasies. But the explanation for the current low state

of the art isn't wholly technical. It's also—primarily—financial.

Bill Melendez, creator of the "Peanuts" specials, says, "There are two reasons for the terrible look of animation. No budget. And no time to do it properly." It now costs about \$100,000 for a half hour of limited animation. Animation has never been cheap—six-minute shorts cost about \$35,000 two or three decades ago. But with the virtual demise of theater cartoons, television is now just about the only market for animation. (Some theatrical features are still being made, the "Pink Panther" for one. But most cartoons seen in movie houses are reruns from the idyllic days of animation.) And television has no use for six-minute shorts. Television demands the half-hour format, and the costs have risen accordingly—and dramatically. "So," says Melendez, "money can be saved only in labor costs, forcing animators to do footage at a much cheaper rate [with far fewer drawings]."

No network is going to spend \$350,000 to \$400,000 for a fully animated show on Saturday mornings. Networks do spend that much for a full-animation prime-time cartoon special because they can charge top prices—\$80,000 to \$130,000—for a minute commercial. That same 60-second commercial on Saturday morning generally ranges from \$12,000 to \$25,000. Obviously, no network is going to shell out more than a quarter of a million dollars when their return is less than half that.

Jerry Golod, CBS vice president of children's programming, says, "If we spent the kind of money on Saturday morning that we do in prime time, we'd be out of business. We're talking about a commercial network responsible to a parent corporation." And Saturday-morning cartoons—riddled with commercials—now show a profit sufficient to keep networks happy . . . and uninterested in better cartoons.

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In some respects, of course, what the children see on Saturday morning is as entertaining as it ever was. A shark that speaks English with a strange accent is vastly amusing. A dog, talented at kung fu, is laugh-making. Even a sourpuss adult can get at least 10 giggles from Saturday-morning cartoons. But there's something missing—call it "technical quality"—that's noticeable to discerning observers.

Historically, animation is an art beloved not only by the masses but by film and art critics (animation festivals still sell out). The list of greats, near-greats and barely greats in animation is endless. One of the art's holiest men is Otto Messmer—the creator of "Felix the Cat." In an interview a couple of years ago, Messmer, now 85, explained what it's all about: "I had Felix sparkling all the time. Most of the [other] cartoons were like a dummy . . . so I used an extreme amount of eye motion, wriggling the eyes and turning his whiskers. That's what the public seemed to like—expressions."

Walt Disney was clearly the most famous animator of them all, from the time he created Mickey Mouse in 1928. He was transmogrified into a saint long before he died. In 1941, artists dissatisfied with working for Disney formed United Productions of America (UPA), creating the original Mr. Magoo and Gerald McBoing-Boing. But by the mid-'50s, movie studios were beginning to feel the impact of television: fewer people were going to the movies. Studios sold their theater chains and closed down. Animators turned to television; like aging movie stars who turn to roles in horror movies, they had nowhere else to go.

"When the studios closed their doors, we were out on the street," says Joseph R. Barbera, who with William Hanna drew the original, mythic Tom and Jerry. "We created limited animation not out of wanting to do it, but out of wanting to stay alive and eat." →

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Hanna-Barbera now produces *Yogi Bear*, *Scooby's All-Star Laff-A-Lympics*, *Challenge of the Superfriends* and *The Flintstones*. Coming up is a new version of *Popeye*.

"The entire animation industry has been forced into a seasonal basis of operation," says Lou Appet, business representative of the Motion Picture Screen Cartoonists Union. "Only a handful of people work throughout the year—because of the inflexible time schedules imposed by the networks. Every sort of shortcut and time-saving device is a way of life."

David DePatie and Friz Freleng—*The Pink Panther*, *Baggy Pants and the Nitwits*, *What's New, Mr. Magoo?*—are old animation hands who agree with Appet. After they get out about 17 half-hour shows in nine months, they fire half their work force. But *The Pink Panther*, DePatie and Freleng's gift to posterity, has kept its quality intact because of an arrangement the two have with United Artists. They do 17 *Pink Panther* theatrical releases a year, which are sold to the networks. "That's the financial spine of our business," DePatie says. "We couldn't have the quality we do without it."

Animated specials in prime time are another matter—undilutedly full animation, they are the industry's *crème de la crème*. Every animation studio turns out at least one a year.

Chuck Jones, one of Bugs Bunny's and Daffy Duck's fathers and the creator of the Road Runner, Wile E. Coyote, and Pepe Le Pew, is responsible for the fully animated classic "The Grinch Who Stole Christmas." He does one hour of television a year—two half-hour cartoons, usually for CBS. Jones, one of animation's venerables, isn't charmed by Saturday-morning spawn. "The real problem for the child in watching is that everybody moves alike. The way you move is what you are."

An hour's worth of TV a year allows Jones time to draw, animate and pro-

duce cartoons of splendor. "I've found, if I need to, I can take people away from the bigger studios because it gives them satisfaction to work on something good," he says. Jones himself would rather enjoy what he's doing than be rich. Besides, he gets comfortable residuals from his old specials and a hefty piece of change from his new ones.

Not all animators bemoan their outcast state, though. Lou Scheimer and Norman Prescott of Filmation are producers of *Fat Albert and the Cosby Kids* (a frequent award-winner), and *The Batman/Tarzan Adventure Hour*. "It's a stupid charge that animation isn't as good as it used to be," says Prescott, choking on his exquisitely prepared lunch at the very thought. "Kids don't count the number of drawings; that's an adult qualification."

What turns his mind to butter, Scheimer says, is CBS's not ordering new *Fat Albert* cartoons. The network will be rerunning the old ones this fall. Filmation doesn't make as much money from rental fees as they would from new *Fat Alberts*, but uppermost in their minds is the spiritual blow they suffer. "It is frustrating when a network doesn't keep a show fresh," mourns Scheimer. "CBS would never allow this to happen to *All in the Family*."

"*Fat Albert* is just too expensive to do new ones," says CBS's programmer, Golod. "That's the reason we haven't renewed it."

Alas, the animators' lot is not a happy one, not with their primary buyers (the networks) frowning on spending an extra shekel. Unless, of course, the animators are rescued by millions of kids clicking off their TV sets in an anti-animation demonstration, demanding the best. Hardly likely.

Most kids look forward to Saturday cartoons—whether they're full or limited animation—with the same pleasure they look forward to thumb-sucking, junk food and Disneyland. **(END)**